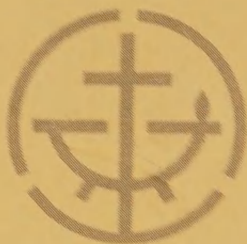




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Songs
Without Clothes

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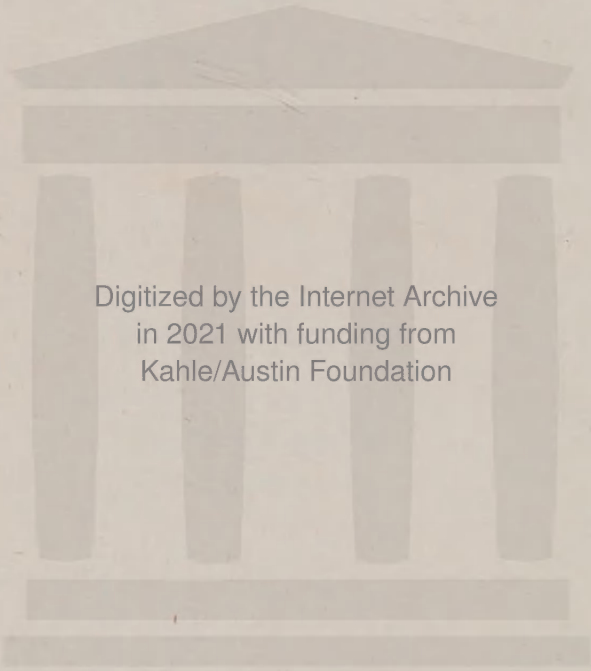
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SONGS WITHOUT CLOTHES

BEING A DISSERTATION ON THE SONG
OF SOLOMON AND SUCH-LIKE SONGS, BY
1882-1940
ERIC GILL TOGETHER WITH A PREFACE
BY FR. VINCENT M^cNABB, O.P.



PRINTED AND PUBLISHED AT S. DOMINIC'S PRESS
DITCHLING SUSSEX ON THE FEAST OF
THE PRESENTATION OF OUR LADY
A.D. MCMXXI.

WITHOUT CLOTHES

BEING A DISSEMINATION OF THE LONG
OF THE GIGON AND SUCH-LIKE TOGETHER
WHICH ALL THE OTHER WITH A FINE
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THEY ARE THE ONLY ONE OF THE GREAT
THE PRESENT ONE OF THE GREAT
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PREFACE

By Fr. Vincent McNabb, o.p.

This essay is an adventure in prophecy. A prophet is, at least grammatically, a man who not only foretells but also outspeaks. It will be granted that the writer of this essay is outspoken. His speech is not insinuation or suggestion but direct narration. Even his metaphors do not clothe but unclothe the truth unto eyes accustomed only to the tints and mists of sentimentalism. To such eyes the hard and fast colours of the truth are almost an affront.

It may be objected, perhaps truly, that the writer's words are here and there too turbulent for truth. In reply be it said that in his role of prophet the writer had to give vent to hate; and hate can be fittingly dealt with only by anger. Now hate and anger, after the Divine model, are such very supreme emotions that only the Man Who was a Divine Person fittingly expressed them. There are certain lesser failings or sins that are the tokens or parasites of great virtues. A humble man cannot be proud, but can hardly fail to be vain. Again the great substantial "patience of the poor" is wedded to a thousand irritations.

So, too, the Church of God has always claimed Infallibility, and never impeccability. She has claimed to tell the Truth. But she has not claimed to be timely or temperate in her truth-telling. Nor has she claimed to be sinless in

her truth-living. It might be questioned by such as can see without irreverence a parent's shame, whether in their dealings with principalities and powers, and with the spirit of wickedness in high places, now and then the official leaders of the Church have not tarried to announce the truth. Slavery might have been dead centuries before it did die if only clerics had had the courage of the truth. Heresies might have withered of spiritual drought if the Hierarchies had been less set on the kingdom already come. Sloth can be a greater sin than schism; and hate deserve still hotter condemnation than heresy. Even now Churchmen may sin though not by direct denial of the truth.

The writer of this essay towards the asceticism of art covets for the maker of things the right which every priest officially has of being a free maker of good things. The official words of the priest to the world are not not news but an evangel, *i.e.* good news. When a man is made a priest his hands are consecrated as the hands of an *εργατης*—a workman (Matt. ix. 38). That hallowing of his hands not merely fits him for his priest-craft, which is Christ-craft, but dedicates him to the freedom with which Christ has made him free. No craft in the world is at heart so free and so opposed to servile conditions as is the craft of the priest. Plato dreamed of statesmen who would be artificers of freedom. In a better way than was dreamed of by Plato the Guild

or Hierarchy of priests have sought and wrought the redemption of the people.

The passionate pleadings of this essay, though they are anger lashed by hate, are not merely hate and anger. S. Thomas assures us that there is no anger that does not finally work or desire joy, and no hate that is not enkindled by love. It is surely a matter of rejoicing that in the turmoil of this essay we see an artist, out of sheer hatred of the degradation of art, demanding as the one thing necessary to redeem art, some of that liberty of the sons of God which the priesthood has kept inviolate against a thousand tyrants. We priests have realised by bitter experience that a servile priesthood is a degraded and venal priesthood. It is, perhaps, the aim and purpose of his essay to beseech us to realise in the churches we build and the church furniture and vestments we buy, that a servile art is a degraded art. Moreover if, according to Pope Leo XIII, the pressing question is that "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the working poor a yoke little better than slavery itself," and if for these servile conditions "a remedy must be found and found quickly," it becomes an urgent duty upon us to see that, whenever we seek to worship God by the fabric or the furnishing of a Church, this shall be the worship of free men who, in the spirit of the *Rerum Novarum* have "become owners" of the tools with which they work and the house wherein they work and dwell.

SONGS WITHOUT CLOTHES

A dissertation on the Song of Solomon and such-like songs.

THE Song of Solomon is one of the Canonical Books declared by Holy Church to be an inspired writing. It is a poem of which atheists can see the beauty, even when they cannot see the meaning, of which moralists can see the meaning, even when they cannot see the beauty.

But the Song of Solomon is a love song, and one of a very outspoken kind, and in modern England such things are not considered polite. The Song of Songs, like the Angelic Salutation, would never, in its unbowdlerized state, be included in ecclesiastical literature were it the work of any modern poet, and if it were known to be the work of a wealthy and luxurious monarch it would scarcely be tolerated even in secular literature. Puritanism and vice make cowards of us.

“How can the Song of Solomon be called a religious poem?” the sceptic asks. “It is all about love-making, and the charms of woman.”

Duo ubera tua, sicut duo hinnuli caprae gemelli. (iv. 5)

By what stretch of imagination, by what perversity of clerical apologetics, can such things be called religious? But, indeed, no imagination need be put upon the rack. The whole difficulty arises

from our misunderstanding and consequent misuse of the words "religious" and "secular." We suppose them to designate opposite, or at least discordant categories. We say a thing is religious when we consider it, not merely good and pious, but in some way ecclesiastical. We say a thing is secular when not being ecclesiastical we think it not religious. But the two words do not connote opposed or opposite categories, and as applied to works of art this modern use of them is disastrous. All art properly so-called is religious, because all art properly so-called is an affirmation of absolute values. If we allow the name art to anything irreligious (*i.e.* affirming relative values) then such art is not, therefore, secular, it is merely paltry.* All things are ordained to ends. Some things are ordained to a final end—some merely to a half-way house which, though not an end in itself, is an end for some things. Those things we call religious which are ordained to God as their end. Those things we call secular which, though not irreligious, do not envisage God as their end immediately. Thus a church is called a religious building, and an inn we call secular. But an inn is not, therefore, irreligious. Those things

*The technical distinction between religious and secular, as applied to different kinds of clerics, need not here concern us, though this use of the word is allied to the ordinary use.

are irreligious which are ordained to mammon as their end—that is the devil and hell—they are neither secular or ecclesiastical, as such, but simply x x damned. The confusion arises either by our supposing the word religion to mean simply ecclesiastical, or by our confining its use to those things which are ordained immediately to God by definition. But all things may be, and properly should be, ordained to God in fact. Thus an inn, though not so defined, may be, in fact, a house of God, and, contrariwise, a church may be, and often is, no more than a monument to human pride and vain-glory.

But everything is religious by which God is x praised, and in this sense the Song of Solomon is a x religious poem indeed. Not only is God praised in it, and by it, but His praises are sung in the strongest of all symbolic terms. The love of man and woman is made the symbol of God's love for man, and of Christ's love for the Church. The Church is the bride of Christ. But the love of man and woman is the symbol of God's love, not because man makes it such, but because God made it such. The Church is more truly and really the bride of Christ than any woman is the bride of a man, and all the words of love may be applied to the heavenly bridegroom,

and with the greater force. The only question is: did the writer of the Song of Songs intend a heavenly symbolism, or do we force his words to bear a meaning which, in fact, they do not warrant?

The Song of Solomon is a religious poem by interpretation, and by its intrinsic quality. We will discuss these aspects separately.

1. *The Song of Solomon is a religious poem by interpretation.*

Just as a lamb is a religious emblem by interpretation, and a crucifix is a religious emblem by interpretation, so a love poem may be a religious poem by interpretation. A lamb is not by definition a religious emblem, nor is a crucifix. If we know them to be, in fact, so intended, then we may so interpret them, however naturalistic they may appear, and, conversely, anything may be made a religious emblem, if we wish, whether its maker so intended it or not. To-day the most naturalistic farmyard lamb or dove is, if displayed on a church banner, taken without demur to have a religious significance, and we do not therefore infer that Christians worship sheep or pigeons. The same object displayed upon a butcher's cart, or upon a coat-of-arms, would not be taken to have any religious

significance. It appears, therefore, that the place of the symbol determines its significance. On a church banner a lamb is a religious emblem, on a cart it is not so regarded. } context

So the appearance of the song of songs in the middle of the Bible brands it as a religious poem. But it remains to be explained how it came about that such a poem ever got into the Bible, and how it came about that the Church placed a religious interpretation upon it. x

In the Song of Solomon the love of man and woman is the symbol of the love of Christ and the Church. The poet cannot be accused, however, of the bestial naturalism of the modern purveyor of ecclesiastical symbols. To say *venter ejus eburneus, distinctus sapphiris* (v. 14) is not photographic, though to say *inter ubera mea commorabitur* (1. 12) is not obscure. To say that the Song of Solomon is a naked poem is not, therefore, to say that it is naturalistic. x It is heraldic rather than naturalistic, and x as in all good heraldry there is no obscurity about its symbolism. The symbolism is not obtained by using words in any but their strictly natural senses, but by the intention of the poet. Thus, if one should speak of "the strong arm of God" the words 'strong'

and 'arm' are used in their strictly natural senses, but the intention is not to suggest that God has a muscularly well-developed upper limb, but that God has power to hit and to hold. To 'hit' and to 'hold'! There, again, is heraldry, and it is, in fact, impossible to speak of God otherwise than heraldically. The only difficulty is in the choice of symbols, and in this matter poets of all ages have chosen according to their genius & their sense of fitness. In a strongly religious age all good things will be recognised as being types of divine things. In an irreligious age, on the contrary, divine things will be made symbols of human things, and that humanity was created in the image of God will be forgotten, or remembered only as a jest.

One tragic effect of irreligion is that relative values alone are recognised. Honesty is only inculcated as being the best policy. Sexual morals are thought of as a matter of merely social convenience. Beauty is unknown, and art is nothing more than a means of adornment, of additional refinement, or of pleasure. In such an age even those who have religion look askance at anything not obviously utilitarian, and live in a state of perpetual fear lest their own comfort be disturbed. Any revolutionary

movement brought about by the spiritual starvation of the age they condemn unheard, and they vie with their irreligious neighbours in the vehemence of their condemnations. The social and industrial conditions of the 20th century are the direct result of irreligion; yet when the conscience of mankind revolts, the religious people hold up hands of horror and quake for their investments—the religious people! even many who firmly and sincerely hold the Catholic Faith.

The national and individual sense of beauty has been undermined and destroyed by an irreligious commercialism. Art has become merely a flattery of rich men. Portraiture of ourselves has replaced the making of images of the saints—a perfectly natural and inevitable result of the shifting of interest from divine to human things, and of a complete absorption in relative instead of absolute values; yet when a revolutionary movement breaks out, when young men refuse to worship Mammon, and to spend their time flattering rich customers, and devote themselves instead to a search for the Holy Grail (by whatever name they call it), to a discovery of absolute beauty, and make it a point of honour to adore God, and to serve only Him—then

the religious ones shriek with horror, and, throwing every religious conception to the winds, form themselves into a solid mass in support of the worshippers of Mammon, the purveyors of lovable sweetmeats, the dexterous and sentimental landscape photographers, the white marble nymph manufacturers.

Married love in a pagan age has become a discredited fable. Virginity and chastity are regarded as superstitions. Legitimacy and freedom from disease are the only recognised marks of virtue. Marriage is no longer a Sacrament, but simply a contract made and unmade at law—law which is more and more openly disowning its allegiance to the Christian principles which were formerly its support and foundation. The intercourse of the sexes is a pleasant but essentially bestial contrivance for reproduction, enjoyed in secret, but of which any mention or representation is called disgusting. And the religious, though their faith forbids them, share the common degradation, so that any poet or artist who dares to see in human love a type of divine love, and yet refrains from dressing his view of the matter in the tattered garment of modern ecclesiastical stained-glass is at once pounced upon as an eroto-

maniac, a danger to society, an immoral person, as though the Song of Songs were upon the Index and should be forbidden reading in seminaries and suburbs.

Ah! they will say, but your modern poets are not Solomons and their poems have not the exquisite beauty of the incomparable Song of Songs. Perhaps this is true, but the judgment can only be given upon the evidence, and as for evidence where is there in the Song of Solomon one single word by which you may judge it to be intended as a vision of divine love? The evidence is not verbal. }
It is traditional and intuitive. Tradition has ascribed }
 that intention to the poem, and intuition confirms }
 the ascription. The beauty of the poem is such that }
 it can have no lesser significance. History is witness }
 to the fact that only with such intentions do poets }
 achieve so high a perfection. No man could praise }
 his mistress' body with such complete assurance, }
 such appalling certitude unless his mistress were God }
 Himself. And this is true of all works of art which, }
 going beyond flattery and self-satisfaction, become }
 acts of worship. This it is that makes the thing }
 called art a thing of importance—it is an expression }
 of man's vision of the fact that all good is a type of

God—an application to all things of the prayer that temporal gifts may become eternal remedies.*

We may suppose that the human race has never been more vicious than it is to-day in industrialized Europe and America, yet erotic literature and art have never been more severely repressed.

Police court reports of human frailty are, of course, the staple reading of enormous numbers, and among the more cultured a certain sentimental nudity is popular, but the literature of love, in which mere nakedness is transcended by vision of the permanent value of things good in themselves, this is neither appreciated nor allowed, and that the thoughts, words and deeds of human lovers can be seen as types of the love of God and its most potent symbols is completely forgotten or disbelieved. The Song of Solomon, taken from its place in the middle of the Christian Sacred Book would, in this pagan age, be thought to have none but a natural significance, and if that is so in the case of a well-known and ancient poem how much more blind are we to any supernatural significance in the writings of modern poets.

Beloved undrest

Adrift on such sea

What perfect rest

I am evermore free

On thy woman's breast.

Dear Branch of God's Tree.

* Prayer at Mass "Quod ore sumpsimus....."

But, it may be asked, what is there to show that the modern poet of this modern song* intends more than a praise of natural love? What, we reply by asking, is there to show that Solomon, in the Song of Songs, intended more than a praise of natural love? There are two ways of discussing the answers to these questions. One is the way of charity, the other the way of intelligence. The way of charity prompts us to ascribe good rather than evil motives to others, high rather than low and, further, to see good rather than evil in their works. First, you passively ascribe it; then you actively discover it. This state of charity is necessary to anyone who would be a critic, for you cannot certainly see evil where you are unwilling to see good. "Unless the Lord build the city they labour in vain that build it" is a statement that applies to the work of criticism as much as to the work of building. God is to be the architect of our souls as well as of other people's, and without charity divine architecture is impossible for charity is the cement of such building. X

The Song of Solomon is a religious poem by interpretation, and to this work of interpretation charity has been brought for centuries, so that a religious interpretation is the traditional interpre-

*We quote only a portion of the poem.

tation. The Song of Solomon is, however, the only really well-known love poem that enjoys, at the present time, this advantage. Many other poems are, in fact, so regarded, and the writings of Christian mystics, full as they are of the same imagery, are not ecclesiastically condemned; but, towards modern works, so degraded are we by an almost universal utilitarianism and materialism, we instantly take up a hostile and uncharitable position, and assume as a matter of course that the poet is a lewd fellow. The same thing may be said of painting and sculpture, and, even, indeed, the decorative arts. Anything at all clear and definite in imagery is at once put down as an incitement to sin or a thrusting of an occasion of sin before the innocent and unwary, whereas it is very well known that it is not nakedness that is an occasion of sin, but the half-shown and half-hidden—the blouse that is just low enough to show the hollow between the breast—the wisp of drapery that covers but does not either prevent thought or allay it. In fact, when a man says: “I love the roundness of thighs” he may generally be understood to mean that he loves God, but when he says he adores ‘the hidden mystery in his mistress’ eyes—the gentleness of her gracious touch’ he may generally be

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understood to mean that he loves lechery. Irreligion generally wears the dress of politeness; those who love truth seldom love compromise. In religious times and places things are very different. In such times it is taken for granted that the human is a type of the divine; and the heavenly significance of any poem or painting is at once sought and found.

But the centre of gravity shifted in the year 1517* from heaven to earth, and men ceased to walk with God, and began walking in their own company. And they ceased to build churches, and began building country mansions. They ceased to make images of God and the Saints, and began developing the art of portraiture. They forgot Our Blessed Lady and remembered their mistresses. And it was more than forgetfulness; it was denial. It was more than inaction; it was iconoclasm.

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} 11 to
Francis
Schaeffer

Yet, inspite of the general ruin, religion has been preserved, and, inspite of the general degradation, there have always been individual artists who, though their customers and often themselves did not know it, were really seeing the universal in the particular, the Creator in the creature. Dante, for all the ridiculous romance that has been woven about him, saw in Beatrice and made of her a symbol of

* *Luther's dispute with Tetzel.*

Divine knowledge. Rembrandt, for all his interest in the anecdote, is really only concerned with the absolute Beauty. Cezanne, for all his interest in Nature, is really absorbed in God. Their customers cannot see it, and neither, very often, do ecclesiastics, for many see nothing in art but a sauce for sermons, and are utterly unable to see that a work of art may have, like Nature, an intrinsic Beauty and a supernatural value quite apart from any representative or useful or lovable quality.

It is clear, then, that if we interpret the Song of Solomon as a religious poem we do so because we choose to do so, and not because it is so labelled by its author. We choose to do so—first, because such is the interpretation given by Holy Church; second, because, in spite of the customs of this ridiculous age with its combined priggishness and vice, a religious interpretation is the only one that will stand the test of time. A naturalistic interpretation is found on trial to be impossible. The minds revolts against so elaborate a flattery of merely human charms. It is absurd. As a praise of divine love it is, indeed, inadequate, but as a praise of human love it is fulsome.* How much better it would be if we were

* Compare our Lord's words to S. Peter: "Tu es Petrus et super hanc Petram"
Such talk is but flattery and jesting if it mean a merely human prerogative and an endurance no greater than the span of one man's lifetime.

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to apply the same remedy to all art, and seek it in divine rather than human praise. The sonnets of Shakespeare, for example, immediately become intelligible, and his dark lady at once knowable. The primitive sculptures and paintings of India, China and Greece, and the folk songs of all the world immediately take their proper place in the human chorus of praise and blessing and preaching. And last, and for us most important, the efforts of our own contemporaries become reasonable—the works of those who, called “Post Impressionists,” coming after that last dying flare of the idolaters, impressionism, refusing to continue man’s song of praise of himself, now dare again to utter absolute statements, and, however waywardly, and with whatever youthful flouting of your materialist and hedonist prejudices, again say in paint and stone : “Blessed be God; blessed be His Holy Name.”

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We ask you to assume this in the name of charity, and following the example of Holy Church in the matter of the Song of Songs. But it is not necessarily an utterly gratuitous assumption, for a work of art is properly a work of religious significance by its intrinsic quality as well as by interpretation. Let us now proceed to this second division of our thesis.

The Song is a religious poem by its intrinsic quality.

Intrinsic quality is that quality in a thing by which it is what it is. What a thing means is one thing; what it is is another. The two may be inseparable in the thing, but they are separable in thought, and in the present confusion categorical distinction is imperative.

Philosophically the necessary basis of all religion is the affirmation of absolute values. That such and such is good because it is good, and for no other reason; that such and such is true because it is true, and that such and such is beautiful because it is beautiful, and for no other reasons—these are affirmations of absolute value.

A person making such affirmations has, in however limited a form, religion.* Many persons deny that any such statements are possible. They say that nothing has more than relative value; that we have no right to say of anything that it is good, except as

**It should be understood that, strictly speaking, there can be but one absolute, viz.: God. But, in the paucity of language, we say, elliptically, that those things have absolute value of which the value-standard is God alone. God is its relation, not man's need or convenience. One thing is good because man loves it—another because God loves it. Both have, therefore, relative value. The former has value relative to man's love of it; the latter relative to God's love of it. We call the former relative value, the latter absolute value, because man loves the relatively good, but God can only love the absolutely good.*

relative to our needs, and they would build a philosophy upon a basis of relativity. But we are not proposing to argue this matter here. We are not concerned to prove the truth or untruth of religion. It suffices for our purpose that, rightly or wrongly, the thing religion exists. People have got it; they get it, keep it, or lose it; and those that have it are different from those that have it not. They do different things for they love different things. The possession of it is visible in their works, and is, in fact, the only thing that gives their work any permanent value.

They do good because they love God. "What," asked Socrates in the *Euthyphron*, "is Holiness?" "that which the gods love," replied the pious young man about to arraign his father. "But is it holy because they love it? or do they love it because it is holy?" That was the Socratic rejoinder, and then *Euthyphron* suddenly discovered that he had no time for arguing—you can see Socrates watching him as he hurried off to the law-court. But, indeed, the answer is not as difficult as *Euthyphron* found it. That which is holy because they love it, is holy relatively to their love of it. That which they love because it is holy is holy absolutely, and is God Himself. God loves Himself and Himself only. God

loves the world because He loves that in it which corresponds with Himself. Man, therefore, in loving good absolutely, loves God. But, if God is absolutely good, He is also absolutely true and beautiful, and man, in loving goodness, truth and beauty, loves God. Now, religion is properly a life and not a theory. It is, therefore, impossible to make a complete statement of it in words. The infinite is a person and not an hypothesis. Truth is a who and not a what. Jesus said : "I am the Way, the Life, the Truth," and Pilate had been answered before he asked his question. But if a complete statement is impossible, a partial statement of the nature and obligations of truth and goodness can be made, and to this end many creeds have been formulated, adumbrating and leading up to the complete statement, which is Christ. In the matter of beauty, however, even a partial statement is impossible in words, and we can only fall back on the knowledge that God is Beauty as He is Love and that Nature is a partial revelation of Him. Even Nature is only a partial revelation, because no individual thing in nature is a perfect manifestation of its prototype in the mind of God. Nevertheless, by an intuitive process man is capable of constructing an idea of beauty

nearer to God's mind than is any natural object, and in the activity called art he is both contemplative and apostolic. } x

The utility of good conduct is so obvious that even in an irreligious age strenuous efforts are made for the inculcation of morals, and those who are quite insensible to beauty, or even to truth, both of which have less obviously utilitarian value, are ready enough to support the churches, whether Christian or otherwise, in their attempts to foster at least a minimum of neighbourly good manners. Yet it is really a pitiful sight to see the fear of the moralist confronted with the moral decrepitude of an industrialized country, for the same man, though the enormity is as great or greater, will cheerfully condone sins against the Holy Ghost when expressed in philosophic or aesthetic terms.

To do what we love doing because we love doing it, and not because it is good, leads to not doing what is good because we do not love doing it—this is wickedness. To think what we like to think because we like thinking it and not because it is true, leads to not thinking what is true because we do not like thinking it—this is wickedness. To see what we like seeing, not because it is beautiful, but

because we like seeing it, or to hear what we like hearing because we like hearing it, and not because it is beautiful, leads to the rejection of what is beautiful because we do not like seeing or hearing it—this is wickedness. The will is involved in all these sins, but because the inconvenience attending breaches of codes of action are more obvious and more immediately destructive of our economic security we are much more ready to be down on such sins than upon those which do not so immediately and apparently effect our pockets and our persons, or the persons of those we love. Yet the sins of the flesh are no more wicked, and, as some moralists even say, involve less deliberate hatred of God than sins of the mind. The fleshly appetites are imperious and urgent, and the sinner has often much temptation. But for self-indulgence in matters of the mind we can claim less excuse, and, though they may not be obvious, the results of mental depravity are at least equally disastrous, for blasphemy is a rot of the soul. We are ready enough to praise the ascetic who mortifies his body; we have little praise for him who mortifies his mind, who refuses to wallow in the sensual delights of the eye and ear, and in this respect pious people are not the least offenders. In nunneries

and monasteries, where the utmost physical mortification is practised, the utmost aesthetic and sentimental licence is allowed. The intellectual depravity exhibited in most modern churches is appalling, and the seeming complacency with which, in such places, they will tell you that they don't know anything about music, for example, but that they know what they like, is such as to make the disgust of clear-minded people easily understandable. God is good. How would the Catholic priest take it if someone said to him: "I don't know what is good, but I know what I like doing?" God is truth. How would he take it if one said: "I don't know what is true, but I know what I like thinking?" Supposing there were no infallible guides in the matter of goodness, beauty, and truth, it would still be reasonable to suppose that sensual wallowing in any form of mental and physical delight would not be the best road to that self-forgetfulness which is essential to the love of God. It has been said that there can be no true mysticism without asceticism, and it is true that the first stage in the soul's journey to God is renunciation. They make the glory of God's house their excuse. They deceive themselves for they make their own physical likes and dislikes the test

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of what is glorious. What is pretty, what is pleasing, what they can rest on as on a cushion, what reminds them of things and places they like — such is the stuff they presume to deck out the house of God withal, and all must be done according to some approved fashion, so that just as the suburban lady cannot imagine a house without a drawing-room, so modern people can hardly imagine a church that is not Gothic or classic. Gothic or classic make them feel those comfortable physical sensations which they take to be appropriate in a place of worship, and I suppose it would be impossible for them to believe that other people are as nauseated by their churches as they would themselves be in a night club. When confronted with these considerations they take refuge in a posture of innocence. They say : “We can’t all be expert artists; don’t despise the gifts of the poor.” But they are not expected to be expert artists any more than we are expected to be expert theologians, and they are not the gifts of the poor. They are the commercial product of factories upon which the poor people’s money has been expended, and they have thus expended it because it pleased them to do so. Who has not seen them in the ecclesiastical furnishers like women

in a hat shop. They like the stuff, and the poor like it too, and are not encouraged to make any rebellion against the commercial and industrial conditions which foster the manufacture of such sentimental nastiness. Four centuries of heresy and schism have destroyed industrial freedom. The modern workman is a servile tool, and all sense of absolute value has been destroyed in him. The good is what will sell, the beautiful is what will sell, the true is what will sell. And what, in fact, will sell? Simply what pleases a people given over to mental luxury and sloth. The workman is to blame for being so supine a slave, but their teachers are also at fault, for their leniency to the merely rich, their acquiescence in the gradual building up of modern servile conditions of industry—the factory system—which has speed, quality and cheapness, and the increase of profits for its sole aims, and their blindness to the bearings of the faith upon matters of life and work. “A man can be a very good Catholic in a factory;” that is the utmost limit of the acumen of most Catholic moralists. St. Agnes was a very good Catholic in a Roman brothel. But neither statement proves that such places are suitable for Catholics, or that servile labour or prostitution are Christian activities.

“The law, therefore, should favour ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the humbler classes to become owners.” These are the words of Pope Leo XIII. How far have they been acted upon or even preached by Catholic leaders? Instead of this they have contented themselves with giving more or less genteel hints to masters and manufacturers to the effect that they should be more kind to their employees, and pay them more generously, and have kept all their anger for the unfortunate workman, whom they have never been slow to accuse of idleness and treachery. There are honourable exceptions. But here we have only to note the general truth that most Catholics do not make any firm and definite disavowal of the modern industrial system (they even batten upon it by investing funds in industrial undertakings) and that, as a consequence, the masses of the poor, whose condition, as Leo XIII said, “is little better than that of slavery itself,”* regard the Church as the supporter of money-makers and the opponent of freedom.

The Church is not the enemy of freedom. She is its only real support, and also she is the only opponent ✕

* *Encl. Rerum Novarum*, p. 4.

of the unjust rich. But at the present time these facts are hidden from the majority of the people by reason of the inertia and ignorance of Catholic leaders both lay and cleric. And in nothing is this inertia and ignorance more evident than in the encouragement given to the irreligious and merely sensual and sentimental art of a commercial civilization. }

The efforts of priests to inculcate morals are suspect. For they are taken to be made merely in support of an established society which the masses of the workers recognise as rotten. If men strike for higher wages—and £500 per annum is considered high wages—they are accused of envy, vice, disloyalty and greed. But if a master, by degrading labour—increasing the quantity and lowering the quality—is able to increase his income from £5,000 to £10,000 per annum, he is considered a prince of the people, and, if he gives large subscriptions to churches or charities, his methods as a manufacturer are not even questioned—on the contrary, they are belauded. And all this is not because the leaders are really snobbish or corrupt, but simply because they have not had either the courage or the energy to apply the principles of the Faith to the life of the times. “They are without intellectual courage—

in a word, they are more ready for martyrdom than the Apostolate." They have failed to see that you cannot preach the responsibility of men for their sins and not oppose to the utmost a civilization which denies to men responsibility for their work, and deprives them of ownership of their homes and workshops. The cry for higher and higher wages and shorter hours and more amusements is the inarticulate demand of an enslaved and degraded proletariat—a proletariat so far degraded and enslaved that it has lost even the appetite for ownership and responsibility, and has forgotten that it ever had such things.

And if among the proletariat the efforts of the clergy to inculcate morals are suspect, and the people are unable to believe that such a thing as a divine law, a law of absolute value, exists—at the other pole of civilization, they are equally discredited, and people of ascetic mind are revolted at the sentimentality and sensuality of the paraphernalia of Christian worship. We say we have the truth, and we deck it out in sham Gothic trappings! It is no use blaming the architects. Anyone with a little thought can see that there is no real necessity to employ an architect. He is a person whose whole *raison d'être* consists in

his supposed ability to protect his customers from the rapacity of commercial builders, and to supply what a commercial builder naturally and properly lacks, namely :—a sense of beauty in design. The builder has become merely a man of business and his men mere tools. He is concerned primarily for profits, and they for wages. So we call in an architect to supply beauty! And as he cannot supply it he supplies us with “Gothic” or “classic” or some other by-gone style, fondly believing and persuading those responsible to believe (and apparently thoroughly succeeding) that style is beauty. Shall we achieve truth by writing in the style of S. Thomas Aquinas? No more shall we achieve beauty by building in the style of the middle ages or in any other style but that one which is the product of our own vision of God. Beauty is not a matter of style; it is a matter of the love of God. “The vision of it is the work of him who has the will to see.” But though it cannot be demonstrated to the blind, the essence of it can be described, and at least a simple test may be given by which we may make a beginning of the examination of conscience.

If it can be said of a man that he did such and such a thing for the love of God, and not for the love

of any worldly advantage to himself or others, we cannot say: therefore his act is, in fact, good. But we can say that such a motive is a good motive, and that habitual action with such a motive would be presumptive evidence in favour of the goodness of his actions. The more strictly critical such a man were in his examination of conscience the greater would be the presumption in his favour. Suppose now that to the unaided conscience were added the infallible guide of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Church; then of actions undertaken with that guidance, and solely for the love of God, and not for any worldly advantage, we can say with certainty that they are good.

The application of these principles to works of art is not so difficult as is often supposed. Writing a book, painting a picture, feeding the hungry, are all acts involving the will, and demanding the correspondence of the will of man with the will of God for their perfecting. "This is the will of God—your sanctification." Sanctification—that is making holy, and nothing can be made holy which is merely self-indulgence. In the matter of art it is self-indulgence that is the whole trouble. Artists and customers are both outrageously self-indulgent.

The great majority of modern artists are not concerned with beauty at all, but simply with the representation of what pleases them sentimentally. This trade may be quite useful, and even, when morally conducted, quite harmless, but it is obviously of only relative and ephemeral value. The subject of a picture may be of absolute value, but the painting of it may be quite the opposite, and that is the thing which causes most of the confusion in modern minds, for it has come to be assumed that it is subject that gives a work of art its value, whereas, in fact, subject is no more important in a work of art than in any other act of love. The subject is simply the jumping-off ground, and a jumping-off ground, though generally and for most people necessary, is not a *sine qua non*. The sight of a beggar moves you to compassion, and you give him alms, but the important thing is not the beggar or the alms, but the compassion and the will to express it. Some people are compassionate without the assistance of beggars and without the possession of money! The beggar and his hunger are simply the spring-board for your act of charity. In the same way you see a spider and you are moved to—what? If you are a timid sort of person, and unused to spiders, you will shiver with

a sort of horror. If you are not timid, and are interested in natural mechanisms, you will be moved to admiration at the perfection of the creature as an organized contrivance for the performance of certain functions. If, however timid, you are one of God's little children, and are moved to love of Him by the Beauty of His creation, then to what deed will you be urged? Wonderful to relate, the answer given to-day most readily will be that you will get a piece of paper, and make a copy of the spider! What an anticlimax! You might as well suggest that the compassion to which you are moved at the sight of a beggar should impel you to take a photograph of him. No—the proper result of the realization of the Beauty of nature is the storing up in your soul of the memory of it, and the resolve to give to your work a like perfection of Beauty and fitness. Copying nature is no more a part of the business of the craftsman than analyzing nature is part of the business of the saint. Representation is no more important in a work of art than beauty is in a photograph. Representation is only important when the artist is under contract to supply it, and then it is as craftsman rather than as artist that he essays it. If you undertake to paint a portrait of a person, obviously

you will be acting dishonestly if you demand payment for a painting that does not resemble your customer. If you undertake to make a crucifix you will act dishonestly if you supply an object which bears no resemblance to a man upon a cross. If you undertake to make a set of Stations of the Cross it is necessary that your panels shall represent the several scenes of the Passion, but the exact degree of representation, of photographic accuracy, of anatomical exactitude required or desirable, it is not possible to determine. It will be sufficient to notice that the degree of representation will be in exactly inverse proportion to the religious fervour of the artist or his epoch. There is no doubt whatever that portraiture and naturalistic painting, sculpture and music are always found concurrently with the decay of dogmatic religion. An interest in and enthusiasm for the imitation of natural effects is always the accompaniment of a decay in interest and enthusiasm for divine truth. All ages and nations bear witness to this fact. Naturalism has always and everywhere been the sign of religious decay.

The achievements of ancient Greece in her last phase, and the achievements of the period called the Renaissance, glorious as they may appear, have had

a poisonous effect upon the world which has admired them. For the religious quality in those works (we are not referring to their subject matter but to their intrinsic quality), which they inherited from their predecessors, is not the quality for which they were immediately found admirable. They were admired, and are still admired, for the completeness with which they made the conquest of nature, for the perfection of their humanism, for the success with which, like clever comedians in a theatre, they reflected and enshrined man's admiration of himself. "Thus the Christian imagination of the men of the Renaissance projected its own mental image on the clouds . . . and, without knowing it, admired itself in a world which was nothing but its own reflection."* The history of art since the 16th century has been a faithful reflection of the progress of the world from one infidelity to another, and to-day we find ourselves at the nadir. Politically we must either again embrace slavery or set our faces towards a complete reversal of the existing social system. Morally we must declare ourselves hedonists, or again set up Christian chastity as our rule. And as workmen and artists we must declare

*Kurth : "The Church at the Turning Points of History," trans. V. DAY (p.125.)

ourselves to be merely the lap-dogs of the rich and the white-washers of sepulchres or, again becoming obedient, refuse the flattery of ourselves and our customers, and, beginning again the beginning, concern ourselves solely with our work, and apply to it, at every moment, the test question : " Am I doing this because it is right, good and beautiful in itself, or because thus it pleases me or my customers that I should do it?"

This test, which in a simple and more innocent age is applied almost without thought, is to-day only applied with the utmost difficulty. Examination of conscience which, among simple people, requires little mental exertion, becomes, among self-conscious people, deprived of habitual religious orientation by centuries of religious decay, a matter of extreme difficulty. They either struggle in the pot of self-doubt which is called scrupulosity or destroy themselves in the fire of self-justifications.

But if it be difficult to apply the test to ourselves and to our own work, it is comparatively easy to apply it to the works of others and to the works of the past, and even if all our own personal predilections are opposed to them, and they seem utterly gaunt and unpleasing, we cannot fail to observe

that, whether pleasant or not, the work of religious periods, owes whatever value it has to its intrinsic merits, and not to its subject matter, its cleverness or its mimicry of nature. The word "conventional" best expresses the universal character of all really religious art — religious, that is, not by reason of its subject matter, but by reason of its devotion to absolute values. A dead convention is the devil. Far better be blatantly sentimental and voluptuously naturalistic. But just as a creed is an intellectual convention, and a liturgical worship is conventional worship, so all really Godly art is conventional, and the devilishness of a dead convention lies in its lip-worship and hypocrisy, in its pretence of worship where there is really only flattery and commercialism. The sham Gothic of the 20th century is such a dead conventionalism, and the clergy and laity who delight in it are only less to blame than the artists who practice it and the ecclesiastical furnishers who make a paying business out of it.

For what is convention? It is, as the word implies, a coming together and agreement. It is, in art, the enshrining of the universal in the particular, so that in a conventional rose all roses are resumed. It is the art of children, and of such is the Kingdom of

Heaven. For it is the grown-up person who is interested in his own reflection in the mirror, and would rather see himself with all his wrinkles and idiosyncrasies than any generalization of form such as the child intuitively envisages and creates. Only those who manage to preserve, in whom the Grace of God preserves their childhood, are capable of this self-abnegating attitude of mind. It is for this reason that women have so rarely been even mediocre artists (and the thousands of young women who to-day cultivate the arts show no talent for anything but the making of pretty imitations of natural scenes or objects) for they are by the nature of their calling as mothers impelled to a more material responsibility — a compunction which clings to them even when, as in the cloister, they forego the actual bearing and rearing of children. And commercialism makes women of us all, so that in our concern for the material things of life, even men, who at all ages are more childish and even childlike than women, lose their power of creation, and become immersed in the mere gossip and anecdote of “representative” art.

In a commercial age all absolute values are forgotten, and the value of anything is reckoned in

pounds, shillings and pence. Pious people are infected by the prevailing disease, and though they would strenuously deny that their morals are merely utilitarian they display the quality of their minds in their love of the merely pretty and pleasing in art. They are incapable of appreciating anything hard, or definite, or dogmatic. They are like the good Anglican or Dissenter who objects to the Mass because it is said in Latin. He does not go to church to give but only to get, and in the same way we expect the artist to minister merely to our pleasure, and have no conception that all works of art are acts of worship in which it is necessary that both artist and beholder take part. When confronted with the works of religious ages (*e.g.* the 10th century) we console ourselves by saying that this was a coarser age, an age full of quaintness and naiveté but deficient in skill and refinement, and we fondly believe that the people of that age would have made accurate copies of nature if they had been clever enough. But it is not copying it that is difficult, but invention, and to derive enjoyment from the use of the senses demands no great effort from anyone. Anything that requires effort for its understanding, and concentration beyond the inclination of a

people brought up on the cinematograph and the half-penny illustrated newspaper, anything that does not merely flatter them, anything that demands the least asceticism, the least curbing of their insatiable lust for the pleasure of eye or ear they reject, calling it gloomy or uncouth or mad. They even call it immoral or diseased as if anything could be less moral or diseased than the wantonness and frivolity of the Royal Academy and the ecclesiastical furniture shop. They are like a man who should excuse himself for swearing by saying that, at any rate, he did not beat his wife excessively; for they seem to think that mortification is only asked of them in matters of the bed and the stomach, and that they may revel in any kind of spiritual frivolity that is put before them.

The cure for this modern obsession with mere representation in art is a realization that the Catholic Faith is "like the sun which must penetrate everything to vivify everything; that there is such a thing as Christian aesthetics just as there is Christian politics and Christian economics; that the beautiful, like the true and the good, is one of the aspects of the Supreme Being, God; and that in art, as in nature, nothing is beautiful which does not bear on its brow

the reflection of the uncreated Beauty ;”* and, further, that this Christian aesthetic implies, not, as most writers have made out, that works of art reach their highest eminence when in them is achieved the closest veri-similitude, but that the greatest achievements of art, are those in which man, given a thought in itself true and an occasion in itself good, apprehends and creates a form in itself beautiful.

In this respect it is true to say that a plain piece of black and white chequer embroidery is often a thing of greater beauty than the stained-glass saints and white marble angels with which we think to honour God in our churches, but with which we only succeed in pleasing ourselves or alienating our friends. A naturalistic and sentimental representation of an angel or a water-fall may be a very interesting and even useful object, but its proper place is in a museum or a cupboard, and not upon the wall of a building. For it is as out of place on a wall as a colloquialism in the creed,† or as the four and twenty live blackbirds in the pie. Such things are altogether too unconventional and might very well be reserved for odd moments of amusement on a “Bank” Holiday. A healthy life is a religious life, and a religious life is a

* Kurth (Ibid), p. 124.

† E.g. I put my money on God = I believe in God.

conventional life—a liturgical life. Our present pride in unconventionality is a sign of our irreligion.

But it must not be supposed that we are set upon reviving religion for the sake of convention, or even for the sake of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

We are simply stating the fact that these modern phenomena are evidences of irreligion. The primary intention of this essay is to show that the evidence of religion is not only moral and intellectual, but also aesthetic, and we have taken the Song of Solomon as an example because it enjoys a reputation which, were it not one of the canonical books, it would never in this age be thought to merit, and is, therefore, a challenge both to believers and unbelievers.

Now, that the Song of Solomon is a religious poem by its intrinsic quality should be clear to anyone who having the decency to divest his mind of all inclination to search out naturalistic meanings for obviously conventional statements, allows himself to bathe, so to say, in the contemplation of its formal perfection. In viewing the picture representing Our Lady of Perpetual Succour there is hardly a possibility that the observer will be led to any indulgence in illicit imaginations. He can, therefore, view such a picture in as naturalistic a manner as he will without fear of

reproach. He may derive no particular benefit from so doing, but, at any rate, he will come to no violent harm. But the Song of Solomon is so thoroughly without clothing that if it be religious *only* by interpretation and not also by intrinsic quality, it can only be called indecent, and it would be a gross thrusting of an occasion of sin before the innocent to allow it to appear in a vernacular Bible. We may take it, however, that the fact of its so appearing is tantamount to a statement by Holy Church that this poem does not depend solely upon interpretation for its religious value and we may rejoice in the Wisdom of our Most Holy Mother, knowing that no other authority on earth would dare to proclaim the Song of Solomon to be a thing of Beauty as well as a thing of Truth. It is also an earnest of future fruitfulness, for, while the Song of Solomon remains, poets and artists, as well as priests and philosophers and saints, may be encouraged to sing the praise of God as loudly, and to know that, whoever else may spurn them, the Catholic Church will not deny that all good things are types of the Divine Goodness, and that Beauty is not achieved by making things like things, but by making things like God.

Of things necessary & unnecessary

HUMAN life is in any case a melancholy business, tragedy is more truly the note of it than joy, and we are nearer sanity when we are filled with a sense of the disorder in our souls and in our cities than when, for a moment numbed by food or sleep, we walk oblivious of our weak untidiness.

It behoves us then to save what we may from the welter and first of all our souls and, to this end, putting up as well as possible with the inferior stuff supplied to us for bread, for, suicide being sin as well as crime, we must eat and drink such things as they set before us, putting up, I say, with American flour and Lancashire cotton we can at least avoid the blasphemy of Bird's Custard Powder and the fripperies of Mappin and Webb.

We are not responsible for what other people do or make, but we are responsible for what we do ourselves, and buying is a thing done.

If, upon strict examination of the matter, I conclude that I need bread, I do not sin in buying even bad bread. But I do a scandalous thing if I buy a bad thing which I do not need.

It is commonly said that it is more important that necessary things should be of a good quality than that unnecessary things should be good—that we should make sure of getting good bread even if we

cannot get good custard. Upon the other hand there are excellent reasons why we should get bad bread if we cannot get good, whereas there is no reason why we should get any custard at all if it be not good.

It is not true, therefore, to say that it is more important that necessary things be good than unnecessary things, for it is clear that there is no point in the existence of unnecessary things unless they be good.

It is truer to say that unnecessary things should be good than that necessary things should be good, for inferior bread will at least serve to keep man from starvation whereas bad custard serves only to damn his soul in hell.

"Man does not live by bread alone." And in saying this our holy Lord did not mean merely that man has need also of beef and beer. Clearly He meant that man does not live only that life which bread subserves, but another life also, and one ministered to by spiritual food.

What we call necessary things in common speech are those things which subserve the life of man upon earth—food, clothing, shelter and warmth. And these things are indeed necessary, for the body is the principle of individuation and worthy, therefore, of preservation. *"For I know that my Redeemer liveth and in my flesh shall I see God, my Saviour. Whom I myself shall see and not another."*

But as those things called 'necessary' are ordained to earthly life as their end, so earthly life is itself ordained to an end, and that end is God. Therefore the things called unnecessary are so called either because earthly life has no need of them or because God has none. But if a thing be made of which neither man nor God has need, why should it be made at all? There is no answer to this. The only reason for the existence of a thing which does not subserve earthly life is that God needs it.

Now custard is of this kind. Man can do very well without it here below. But God is the great consumer of custard, and He made man chiefly to the end that sweets should grow in Paradise.

What is it to God that man should be born and grow and wallow in his own sensations? Pah! I am not arguing with those who do not believe in God. Let them wallow. Let them have their finery. Let them cover themselves all over with machine-made ornamental buttons and spend their time looking at themselves in the mirror, neither seeing nor smelling their own beastliness. Let them fill themselves with patent food and smack their lips. Let them fall down and worship before the Queen Victoria Memorial. Let them go to war with their neighbours and destroy one another in millions in order to obtain new markets for the sale of their buttons and biscuits. That is not the tragedy of human life—that is its appropriate comedy!

But those innocents—those simple-minded, who unwittingly encourage the manufacture of inferior ornamentalities—what

can be done to stop their buying of rubbish? Why should good Catholic men and women imitate the habits of unbelievers? Why should good housewives put bad custard on the top of good pudding?

But let it not be supposed that necessary things may without blame be made ill. That is not my argument. My argument is simply this—that if we be unable to make what we need and must therefore buy, there is no blame if, being unable to buy good things, we buy bad things, provided the things be necessary.

But, upon the other hand, when we buy unnecessary things our responsibility is greater, for unnecessary things are either ordained to God, or have no right to exist.

If, then, we buy unnecessary things we become responsible for them, as though we had made them ourselves, and if we buy such things, knowing them to be inferior or bad, we merit the reward of blasphemy.

For what is the purpose of a thing which, though unnecessary for earthly life, is yet of no heavenly significance? Its purpose can only be the service of Mammon. We buy such things merely to please ourselves as they are made to flatter us. Hundreds of thousands of such things, which we use to deck ourselves out with, or with which we think to ornament

our houses or to titillate our stomachs, are obviously inferior or bad. We know this is so, but we do not pause to consider the blasphemous nature of our action in making ourselves responsible for their existence. We cannot claim the excuse that they are necessary to support life. The most we can say is that without them we should appear uncouth or impoverished to our neighbours. It is right and good that we should wish to appear well. But it is absurd to be content with the mere appearance—more especially when it is only the less perspicacious of our neighbours who are thus deceived—so that the only result is that we succeed in deceiving the foolish and in enriching evil-minded merchants and manufacturers. Is that the height of ambition?

Nevertheless there is, indeed, some danger of priggishness in those who are very consciously critical of the quality of the things they buy, and not everyone can be expected to know at a glance, and without fear of error, the difference between bad and good. A certain carelessness is desirable in this as in other matters, and the saying: “*Dilige Deum et fac quod vis*” may very well be paraphrased thus:—“Love God, and *buy* what you like.” But the first words remain the same and, where there is clearly no love of God, God-fearing people can hardly go unharmed unless they be called. All men have a voca-

tion to life, and are bound therefore to buy bread, bad if not good, but there is no call to buy bad custard.

The evil habit of buying bad unnecessary things is necessarily prevalent in industrialized countries like England. In such countries God is unknown or forgotten, and nothing is done for His glory or in His fear. Moreover, in such a country the majority of the people are not themselves responsible workmen, being inerely slaves in factories who never make more than a small part of anything. They cannot know good from bad. Most women are mere buyers nowadays, and have lost all remembrance of the life of their great-grandmothers. They cannot apply any sane criticism to the things they buy, for they have no good standard of criticism. We are all engaged in the attempt to get something for nothing—to sell for more than we gave—to steal.

“He that stole let him now steal no more. Rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good . . .”

Note.— Any manufactured custard powder may be taken as synonymous with bad custard because it is doubtful (1) whether it is custard (“Mixture of eggs and milk, baked or served liquid”—*Dict.*) (2) whether it is good food. Such a concoction cannot therefore be classed with necessary foods.

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